

VZCZCXRO3628

PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV

DE RUEHLB #0973/01 2401516

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 281516Z AUG 09

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5633

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3572

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 4105

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 4024

RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000973

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S EBRIMMER
P FOR AWELLS/RWALLER
DRL/NESA FOR JBARGHOUT
PARIS FOR DNOBLES
USUN FOR AWOLFF/EGERMAIN/ASCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR DSHAPIRO/MMCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA

E.O. 1295: DECL: 08/28/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL LE SY SAIR IS

SUBJECT: WITH CABINET NEGOTIATIONS STALLED, HARIRI HINTS AT
BRINKMANSHP

REF: BEIRUT 966

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The press and nearly all Embassy contacts have declared a stalemate in the government formation process, despite a series of public statements by major political leaders that briefly indicated a move to break the deadlock. Notably, wayward Druze leader Walid Jumblatt came out strongly in support of Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri's efforts to form a national unity cabinet "to confront any possible Israeli aggression," which Hariri echoed by remarking at an iftar, "Hizballah will be in the government whether the enemy likes it or not," in response to Israeli threats. Nonetheless, the pundits' pessimism is still justified. The major internal obstacle is ostensibly the Free Patriotic Movement's (FPM) General Michel Aoun, though Hariri's own demands and intransigence may be slowing down cabinet formation as well. Meanwhile, many still speculate that no government can be forged without the approval of foreign powers. As Hariri hints that he is ready to engage in brinkmanship to get his way, his best tactics may be direct communication with Aoun -- or simply waiting him out. End summary.

COMING TOGETHER AGAINST
"THE ISRAELI ENEMY"

¶2. (SBU) The week began with headlines proclaiming stagnation in government formation, as Saad Hariri's Future TV continued a media blitz against Aoun and Hizballah blamed the PM-designate for the blockage. Nevertheless, some politicians began to soften their rhetoric. First, after weeks of distancing itself from March 14 and Hariri, Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) issued a statement August 24 calling on Lebanese leaders to facilitate Hariri's attempt to form a government, a step which "should be above the calculations of sons-in-law," a clear reference to Aoun's demands that his son-in-law Gebran Bassil be reappointed as Telecom Minister. Jumblatt followed up on

August 25, saying he shares Hariri's view that the new government "should be a national unity government, in order confront the possibility of Israeli aggression."

¶ 13. (SBU) Hariri picked up Jumblatt's baton of reconciliation and anti-Israeli fervor by reaching out to Hizballah in an iftar speech by reaffirming, "I want to confirm to the Israeli enemy...that Hizballah will be in the government whether the enemy likes it or not." For its part, Hizballah reciprocated by expressing its desire for rapid government formation, articulating its faith in the Hariri, and urging progress. Hizballah MP Mohammed Raad deflected blame from Hariri to "outside powers," and resisted criticizing Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, who had sharply criticized Hizballah while calling for a majority government. Even FPM MP Alain Aoun, the General's nephew, issued conciliatory remarks in the press, lauding Hariri for finally calling off the media blitz against his uncle. Hinting that the FPM would show more flexibility if other parties do the same, he called publicly for a meeting between Hariri and Aoun to settle their differences.

AOUN THE PROBLEM?
OR HARIRI?

¶ 14. (C) The General does not fold easily, however, and underscored that his demands are firm and he will not "visit" anyone, adding cheekily that if "someone" wants to negotiate, he can visit the broad terrace of Aoun's house. Caretaker Minister of Culture and Future Party stalwart Tammam Salam

BEIRUT 00000973 002 OF 003

told the Ambassador August 25 that despite being "unstable," Aoun is extremely intelligent, a political animal who does his homework and commits himself to a plan. "Even his allies can't reel him in," said Salam. "With or without the blessing of Syria, he will do what he wants." Alain Aoun explained to PolChief August 26 that the General's obstinacy was the result of Hariri's marginalizing him (reftel) and insisted Hariri will need to find a way to meet with the General in order to move forward.

¶ 15. (C) Hariri has remained stoic in his responses to Aoun's recent rants, winning praise from his allies, including Salam, who assessed that his performance has been "perfect" to date. Nonetheless, Hariri's attempts to isolate Aoun have brought criticism from the opposition (reftel). Opposition MP Yassine Jaber, who is closely allied to Nabih Berri's Amal party, suggested Hariri should have started negotiating with Aoun from the beginning instead of expecting Hizballah to push him. Indeed, Raad has insisted consistently in his public comments that Hizballah is Aoun's ally, but not his mediator.

HARIRI'S UNSPOKEN DEMANDS

¶ 16. (C) While Hariri's maneuvering has made Aoun appear to be the only remaining obstacle to government formation, Hariri himself has been silent on his cabinet demands, which may also be slowing the process. In an August 25 meeting with the Ambassador, Mazen Hanna, Hariri's chief economic advisor, said Hariri intended to focus his reform efforts as PM on electricity, information technology, environment, traffic management, poverty alleviation, and streamlining business practices. When asked if Hariri had approached opposition parties whose ministers might be involved in these areas, Hanna was adamant: "We cannot wslldtQ=V2Q(oQs]2ajority might explain his hardball tactics with the FPM.

HARIRI TO TAKE
RADICAL MEASURES?

¶ 17. (C) Hariri, still smarting from Aoun's brusque rejection

of his invitation to dinner at Qoreitem, refuses to yield to Aoun's insistence that any negotiations between the two of them happen at Aoun's home in Rabieh. With negotiations therefore blocked, Hariri told the Ambassador at his August 27 iftar, "There are things we can do," and indicated he may simply take his cabinet proposal directly to President Michel Sleiman, without further consultations. This would presumably occur after a meeting of the 71 majority MPs to consolidate their position and present a united front, an event that Lebanon First Sunni MP and caretaker Minister of Economy Mohammed Safadi told the Ambassador will take place on August 31. Jumblatt told the Ambassador August 28 that his bloc of 11 MPs will attend the event, which he said is not definitively scheduled, but when asked what progress would happen afterwards, he replied, "Nothing." Meanwhile, Jumblatt advisor Marwan Hamadeh downplayed the significance of the PSP joining March 14 MPs at such a meeting, noting that other "independent" MPs would attend as well, including Christian strongman Michel Murr and Tripoli Sunni Najib Miqati.

¶8. (C) Safadi reported that President Sleiman had indicated he still wanted to work for cabinet formation through "consultation and consensus," making it doubtful that Sleiman would accept Hariri's cabinet proposal if it does not have broad agreement from across the political spectrum. If Hariri fails to form a government this way, the process would

BEIRUT 00000973 003 OF 003

go back to square one. Hariri's cousin and advisor Nader Hariri told the Ambassador, "We need an action-forcing event."

OUTSIDE FORCES

¶9. (C) Many contacts still contend that the Hariri-Aoun spat cannot be the only thing holding up the government and that outside pressures are the real source of stalemate. Salam suggested that Syria, working from a strengthened regional and international position, must be working to freeze the process. Jaber assessed that the Egyptians had been interfering in Lebanon's cabinet formation to serve its own regional interests. Numerous Embassy interlocutors insist that nothing can move forward in Lebanon until the Saudis and Syrians return to the negotiating table. The mood of many is summed up by Jumblatt's comment to the Ambassador that Lebanon cannot form a government "while Saudi Arabia and Iran are fighting from Yemen to Iraq."

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Although contacts from all the political blocs (except for the FPM and Kataeb) indicate they have come to agreement with Hariri on their ministerial allocations, Hariri has kept his cards close to his chest with Aoun. With Aoun playing hardball in response to Hariri's tactics, Hariri seems to be ready to use brinkmanship to bring things to a head and get his way. Given the President's desire for consensus and Aoun's intransigence, this tactic could very well backfire. While Hariri's differences with Aoun appear very personal and possibly irreconcilable, some believe the most effective way for Hariri to handle the current situation is to sit down with Aoun -- the consummate political animal -- personally. Barring that, he may do well to heed the advice Jumblatt told the Ambassador he would offer Hariri: "Wait. They are waiting for you to be impatient and make a mistake."

SISON